

Our Anabaptist Farming Heritage

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I'd like to ask one question: How many of you are farmers? OK, so I'm speaking to about half a choir here.

They asked me to speak about our Anabaptist farming heritage, we have a tremendous farming heritage. Rarely do we hear the strong link between Anabaptism and farming, it's just sort of back there. What is interesting is that John Hochstetler, in his first edition of *Amish Society*, did not have a chapter on farming or agriculture. Of course, the subsequent editions did, after he received criticism mostly from non-Mennonite scholars, who better understood its importance than we did ourselves.

I think Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "A man standing in his own field is unable to see it," and there's a lot of truth to that. The same thing goes for a painting, if you have your nose too close up you can't see it; you have to step back. That happened to my look at agriculture when I was drafted during the Vietnam War and worked two years in Cleveland. I could step back from our community and look at the way we farm in a more positive light. We farm with horses, we had 120 acres.

I should mention a little bit about my stuttering...I had a wonderful schoolteacher, who was a Swiss reformed immigrant and became a Mennonite because he met a Mennonite girl. They married; he became a Mennonite and was a devout member of the Walnut Creek Mennonite Church. Since my great-grandfather was also a Swiss reformed immigrant, he was sort of my dad's friend. My dad went to school under him for seven years, and 40 years later (I was my dad's youngest child; he was almost 40 when I was born) I had him for my second through eighth grades. He was like a second father to me. He never made me do things that embarrassed me in front of the class, even though I sometimes tasted blood from biting my tongue, from stuttering.

Eventually God let me speak, first, when I could from my heart thank Him for my handicap, so I could be more understanding of other people's handicaps. And second - and this was the hardest part of all - learn to laugh at myself. That was very, very difficult. I never expected to get married because my name is D-D-David, I couldn't say it, couldn't pronounce the D sound. (I don't know why I'm telling you all this, Nathan brought it forth.) I lived in Fredericksburg; I couldn't say a word that started with "F". But I finally met a girl who was very kind and understanding. Then I was reading in Isaiah. At least once, or maybe twice, Isaiah writes, "I will let the stammerer speak." He let me speak. And I haven't shut up. I always have this nagging little fear in the back of my mind that God will say, "Your quota has been spoken, you stutter again." And if I do, I had my time.

Let's look back in history. I had many questions when I came home from service and went on the farm... We were married then... I struggled with our way of farming, I think many of us do. We come from a conservative culture, conservative religion, we have a lot of questions, we young people do. I think that's not unhealthy. My brother and I would tell our dad, "If we would sell the horses, we could add 10 more cows, we could farm more and be more profitable." Dad probably didn't give the best answer, we'll get to his answer may be a little later. But he said we wouldn't have that manure.

Our ancestors left Switzerland after the 30 year war and the Treaty of Westphalia (1648). They were hill farmers, they were hill dairy farmers. Because of religious persecution they left the high lands of Switzerland and went north into the Alsace. After the 30 Year War, the lords and the princes needed farmers, so they asked them to come up there. They settled west of the Rhine, that little bit of land called Alsace. At the Treaty of Westphalia that part of Germany became a part of France. At one time the largest Amish community in the world was in France. That's hard for us to believe.

Since they couldn't own land, they rented large estates from the lords and the princes. These were long-term land leases, up to 25 or 30 year leases. The administrator of one of the silver mines in this area said, *"The Anabaptists are by nature very hard-working people who make considerable effort to clear uncultivated land."* We have to remember, they couldn't own land, they were there somewhat like the Mexicans are here. They were guest workers. So they had to succeed in what they were doing. *"They were especially efficient,"* - (this is from the quote again) *"and more so than the other inhabitants of the Alsace in the art of breeding cattle, as well as cattle care."* And they even developed a breed of cattle.

Let me just tell you, the cell phone hasn't been the first issue of technology. (holds up sickle)

When our ancestors arrived in the Alsace, they had what they called the communal three field rotation. Many of us remember the four and five year rotations that our fathers had, as we still do. There was the wheat, followed by hay, maybe two years of hay, then covered with manure and plowed down for corn, the corn plowed for oats, and the oats plowed that fall for wheat, and then back into hay. But they had the communal, or three field rotation system, a form of agriculture which is not very productive, and consisted of the first year, wheat or rye, the second-year, oats, barley, or beans, and the third-year fallow - nothing. Many times they would seed three bushels of grain per acre, and harvest six or seven. We as farmers know that in the long run that isn't very profitable.

There is a book written by a Russian... (which unfortunately I couldn't find before I left. Which is not that unusual. I tend to pile instead of file, and then we have church at our house and the piles get moved, and I never do find things again.) This Russian writer's name was Vladimir G. Simkhovitch, he was a student in Paris, and met an American woman. They married and came to the United States (this was a hundred years ago), where he became a professor at Columbia University in New York City. He wrote three essays collected in a book. The first is "Toward the Understanding of Jesus", the second is "Reconsidering the Fall of Rome", and the third is "Hay and History".

The third part is what I really like, but they all connect; it's a very interesting book. He writes that the downfall of the Roman Empire, up until the time our ancestors left Switzerland and went to the Alsace, was hay. They had grain, they had straw, they had meadow. They needed the meadow for summer grazing, they couldn't cut hay for winter storage, so they couldn't keep much livestock in the wintertime. When we keep livestock in the barn in the wintertime we put down straw, we feed them, we get manure. My father never would have considered plowing an acre of corn ground without a good covering of manure. So this essay "Hay and History" says our Alsatian ancestors started sowing clover and alfalfa into their fallow ground and developed hay fields. The hay started to grow, getting the nitrogen out of the air, and it began to produce more. They could cut hay, they could put livestock in the barn in the wintertime, they got manure to put on the fields, they got more hay, and this started going in the right direction. This is what many scholars think began to create the wealth that sparked the Industrial Revolution.

In order to cut that hay, our ancestors -the Anabaptists- began to use the scythe, instead of the sickle. The natives cut their hay with the sickle. You know there wasn't a lot to cut if they used the sickle. This was such a great leap forward in agricultural technology, that the native people did not use it for a hundred years. They still stuck to the sickle, instead of the scythe. But our ancestors could cut hay. (You know, they say everyone of us that uses fossil fuel has the equivalent of a hundred slaves. I said that can't be. Well, if we have a 12 acre field, I can hitch up 4 horses, and go out there and mow that in 4 hours. It would take a hundred slaves to do that by hand with a scythe.)

So they switched from the sickle to the scythe. They began to store more hay, and could keep more cattle in the barn over winter. They had dairy, they had swine. Nicholas Augsburg, an Amish bishop in Somme, furnished butter and cheese to the innkeepers of the area, who sold them as Swiss foodstuffs. Almost all the milk in the one town came from the farms the Anabaptists leased. Now this again is a quote: *"During the evenings and mornings of every season, people see the young Anabaptist dairy maids come down from the mountains into the village and liven up the streets in the town, bringing in the milk in cans."*

Because they were experienced dairy farmers from the high country in Switzerland, they brought their cows with them from Switzerland to the Alsace. They used these high country cows, called the Oberlander cattle, and they crossed them and actually developed a breed of local cattle called the Montbeliarde. Because our ancestors came from Switzerland, they were not restricted by the local traditions. Because they were renters, they had to succeed, and they were willing to try innovations. For instance, alfalfa, clover, and the scythe. The local people strongly resisted these changes, such as the introduction of legumes.

Soon the name "Anabaptist" became synonymous with "good farmer". People observed how well their crops were doing and how fat their cattle were, compared to the local cows. One said, *"See how much butter, milk, and cheese these farmers obtained in the worst regions by their strong clover farming and animal husbandry."*

Johan Detweiler is credited with introducing gypsum fertilizer to the Palatinate. The effect of gypsum was extraordinary, and everyone noticed. Detweiler had to struggle with resistance against progressive innovation, the local people were against him. But with these innovative changes in agricultural practices, *"Cattle numbers increased threefold, the productivity of the land increased, and the sources of pleasure multiplied. Now this isn't worldly pleasure, but the pleasantness of the area multiplied."* On David Mellinger's tombstone (an Anabaptist) it was written *"The pious patriarch who taught his community clover farming and animal husbandry"*.

You know, they met at their homes for worship, and after the worship they had a fellowship meal, as we still do. That's where the word spread of clover farming, after church. They would go visit other communities and spread the word. (To me that fellowship meal is just wonderful. And I should add that our community [we have a large community] eats about 2 tons of cheese every Sunday. Now talk about supporting local farmers; there it is.)

David Mellinger said of his farming methods, *"I should already have given princes and lords a description of my operation, and how I achieved it. But I cannot tell it so easily; one thing leads to another; it all depends on each other. It's like a clockwork where one gear meshes with another, and the work continues, without my even being able to describe how I got the machine in gear."* Another thing he said: *"When Anabaptists approach their deity, their religious philosophy dictates that they do so in the harmonious company of their neighbors."* - Which I think we see today.

Visitors to the Alsace often remarked at the large number of fruit trees. I think many of us can remember when almost every farm had an orchard. Another quote: *"Seeing the large number of fruit trees surrounding Anabaptists farms in Somme, one could be led to believe that the growing of fruit trees was an Anabaptist specialty, especially cherry trees, from which they produced kirschwasser, or kirsch, a cherry brandy which was said to be as pure as the dew from the sky."* So apparently they had a ready market. One Steiner's renown spread through the region where they lived up towards Strasbourg (he was an orchardist).

Numerous swine were also raised, and the skim milk from the dairy was fed to the swine. We still remember when we fed skim milk, when we'd separate it Saturday evenings (we didn't have milk pickup on Sundays) then Monday morning the local creamery came around and picked up those little cream cans, just miniature milk cans full of cream. We had a hand cranked separator where the cream went out one spigot and the skim milk out the other spigot... We had a large glass that I'd hold under the cream spigot and fill it half-full, then hold it under the skim spigot then shake it a little and drink it. (It shows too.)

Here are two Germans who wrote about the methods used, and the results of the Anabaptist husbandry, how they treated the animals. This was interesting to me. *"They do not tolerate it when animals are hit or scolded or even spoken to harshly, because they become frightened and so abort. Their cleanliness is incomparable. They give pinches of salt as a reward. Rest and warmth, according to them, are much better than an overabundance of feed."* I remember, we had an old bishop in our community, who would check his cows before he went to bed. He'd just peek in on them, and he said, "I wanted to be sure that they were all resting before I went to bed," because rest at that time of the day was more important than the feed.

The Anabaptist farmers were among the first to adopt new items as far as tools were concerned, new tillage tools. In 1860, Nicholas Schwartz said the Alsatian plow was too light for serious work, since it was made entirely of wood, apart from some steel on the plowshare and moldboard. He offered a solution. *"We know they beat their swords into plowshares even in biblical times, so they must have had some steel points on the plows back in those days already"*, but the plows were mostly wood. He went on to say, *"there are at present several real Belgian plows. Something that attests to their superiority is that the plowman loved them after their first test in the field, and afterward argued about who should have the honor of using them regularly."*

I guess some of you have plowed with a good walking plow, going up the field and turning around... While the horses rest you lean on those cross pieces in the handle and look around. My son and I were plowing one spring and got up on the hill. And we looked out around the neighborhood, and counted 15 other teams plowing on different hills. And we knew... I told my son, if some misfortune would happen to us, they would all unhitch and come and help us. That to me was community. (They say community is like an old coat, and I have old coats like that, you wear them on the farm, and my wife says, "Don't you dare go to town with that coat," but community is like that. You wear it for its warmth until you don't have it anymore.)

I like to believe that an agrarian community creates gentle people. Victor Hugo described a character in his *Les Miserables*: he had the German softness and gentleness typical of those in the Alsace-Lorraine area. He was obviously speaking about Anabaptists.

I want to speak a little bit about how the people felt about these gentle people. In the time of the Napoleonic Wars, they came through there to conscript the Anabaptist boys; Napoleon claimed he needed them. "They refused compulsory army conscription and retreated as cowards and traitors to their country." They sent a man from Paris down to Somme to Bishop Jacob Kupferschmidt, and he said of them, "I believe they are the best men on earth."

Now there is an other story (I think Eddie Kline is here somewhere, he would know the story better than I do.). This French official came to Jacob Kupferschmidt's house, and he invited them for the noon meal. They stayed, and after they had finished eating, Jacob Kupferschmidt reached back and got the Ausbund off the shelf, and sang the second hymn, which is long -very, very long. When he was finished singing, the French official said to Jacob Kupferschmidt, "We will fight the wars, you farm the land". And in honor of that, Jacob Kupferschmidt planted an oak tree at the end of his lane, which is still there today.

I wrote here, "This encouraged the Anabaptists to send a delegation to Paris in 1793; they returned with a recommendation from the official that decreed their exemption from military service. How they obtained this recommendation remains a mystery." No, it's not a mystery, Jacob Kupferschmidt sang him that hymn. And they are the only community for which such a demand was taken into account at a time when the country was in grave danger.

The recommendation passed in Paris said, *"The French citizens, the Anabaptists of France, have sent some of their representatives to submit to us that their religion and their morals forbid them to carry arms and to seek leave from us to be employed in the Army in any other form. Taking into account their meekness of heart, and believing that a sound government must ensure that all virtues work for the common good, we advise you to treat the Anabaptists with the meekness that is theirs, to spare them all kinds of persecutions, to grant them to carry out the Army service they request, such as scouts or drovers, or even allow them to discharge themselves the said service in exchange for a sum of money."* Later under Napoleon the use of arms once more became obligatory for them, and this triggered the departure of the great number of Amish from Alsace - Lorraine to the New World, and that's why we are here.

In conclusion here, what I want to leave with you is: Do we as a community leave the same witness that these farmers did? Let's just go back and reread this quote here: *"...and the productivity of the land increased, and the sources of beauty and pleasure multiplied."* Supposedly the dying words of one of the last Roman Emperors, Julian the Apostate, were -this was after Constantine had sort of converted the Roman Empire to Christianity - *"Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; The world has grown grey from thy breath."* That sentence haunts me. I ask the question: Do we live a life that has the joyful example of our Alsatian Anabaptist farmer forbearers, that turned the world to beauty, or does it turn grey from our breath? Thank you.

Question and Answer Time:

James Hershberger, Stuarts Draft, VA: Now, as I understood you, it sounded to me as though the Amish were a bit innovative and made changes and so forth. Sometimes we hear the expression that the Amish are Old Order and traditional and never make any changes. Would you like to comment on that?

David Kline, Jr: All people are resistant to change, we Amish are just more so than everybody else. But we do change. There's constant change. That's why the Amish have always resisted a written Ordnung letter (church discipline). Because if you write an Ordnung letter you have to have a large bottle of white out, because you're constantly making changes. That doesn't look good, you don't want a written Ordnung letter. We're constantly making changes. If you look at us plowing at a distance, it looks like 1920, but we can't go back there. What you don't see is the new under collar, it's a foam collar; horses don't get sore shoulders anymore. The bioplastic doesn't seem very natural, but the bioplastic came because of the lack of good leather. I wasn't aware of this but at a wedding I sat across the table from a harness maker, and he said, "We can't get good leather. The real good three or four-year-old animal leather from bulls and older cows goes to the saddle makers, the very finest saddles get that leather. We have to settle with poor leather, so we naturally went to bioplastic, because of the poor quality of leather. These feedlots finish a steer in 12 to 14 weeks and he is still a baby; his skin is soft."

So we are constantly innovating. We have a lot of freedom. Solar - we have more solar panels in our community than anywhere else in Ohio and maybe the United States. And we don't have any high wires along the road. So there's the beauty of the countryside. You know, we sacrifice a lot of beauty for comfort, don't we? It's like, was it the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers' Karamazov*, who said, "I will be your slave, but feed me"? We sacrifice a lot for comfort. A wood stove, a hand pump for water, that's not sacrificing. Did I answer your question? We're constantly making innovations, but within the parameters of what we have agreed on.

Leonard Gross, Goshen, IN: A recent dissertation on the Mennonites (General Conference, Old Mennonites, Mennonite Church USA) on agriculture, the speaker said, that up until the World War II, Mennonites often left the land in a better condition for their children than when they started, especially if it was a new farm. After the second World War the agribusiness, the large, multinational industrial approach to farming came in, where corn is sown year in and year out until the land is depleted. But more recently Mennonites are again aware of these things and are trying to do better. I'm wondering about the Old Order Amish, and the more conservative Mennonites, was that danger also within the group represented here?

David Kline Jr: We have never had any clear rulings on herbicides etc... Now there is a fairly conservative Amish community in southern Indiana that never allowed hybrid corn. I asked my dad, why do you spray, when we Amish are so ultraconservative on new technology? They had a real problem with common ragweed in corn. 24D just cleaned it out. And then one year our neighbor had completely clean corn, and we asked him what he used. He said it was a new product called Agriseed. Then the next year everybody sprayed Agriseed.

But nobody was warned. My dad and practically all the neighbors got Parkinson's disease. They were all young active farmers during the 1940s & 50s when the extension specialist encourage them to use Heptichlor to spray for spittle bugs in clover. It's very closely related to DDT which was taken off the market's in the 1970s. There were no warnings at all. I can still see my dad unscrew the nozzles on the sprayer and blow them out. There were no warnings at all. So there was technology that was a problem.

But what really saved us, Leonard, was the horse. That happened 100 years ago. This decade is to me an exciting decade, the first centennial of the major decisions that our community made on technology. 1. No tractors for field traction; we use the tractor for sawmills, or silo filling, or for threshing, but not for field traction; that stayed with the horse. 2. The standardbred for transportation so that saved all our small towns without any decree coming down from the federal or state or county governments. That was just a decision made by the church. 3. No electricity from the high lines. When it storms and blows I just yawn and roll over and sleep. 4. Not using the telephone; they wanted face-to-face communication. Of course that has lost out quite a bit with the cell phone. And then of course with our districts we have boundaries. I'm not saying this in a negative way, but once the car was chosen for transportation, boundaries mean nothing for a church. If you get a little pinched here you can just go over there. I appreciated what David Bercot was saying, that we are the feed bed, we produce the members for everybody else. I was really interested in those statistics.

So, it's the horse. All our small towns are healthy and thriving. We came through towns here in eastern Indiana where you'd be embarrassed to live; the buildings are falling apart, there is no life there. And also we have more children; half of our population is under 20 years of age, so we have a young population. We older people, we're around young people, their energy is catching, and it just lifts the whole community. That was a long answer, sorry Leonard.

Daniel Hershberger, Kinsman OH: I was originally a neighbor to David Kline, so we know each other very well. Maybe you can enlarge on this little bit, but it's very ironic when we look at this history of farming. When this country was settled, we had the English coming in, and the farming being started, with Indians helping them, with fish in the hill, and all that. And then the Germans came in (and the Germans were not all Anabaptists) but they all had basically the same concept of farming. They built stone houses, they farmed the same land, and this era is where the Germans had the answers on the ills of agriculture here in this country. Then we go a few generations and all at once these new ideas are coming out of the universities, and these people that were expert farmers back there are falling for this new technology; you talked about that a little bit. I think that's very ironic that we fell for that, and it's great for me to see this thing catching on where people are moving back into that era of "land husbandry."

David Kline: Very good, Daniel. Contrary to the American concept, our forefathers right down to us never looked at farming as drudgery. . The economist Peter Drucker wrote an essay comparing the Industrial Revolution with the Information Revolution, he said the Industrial Revolution moved ahead just as fast as this information revolution, but England never gave the status to the technologists and scientists that they gave to the agrarian's, the worker of the farms. In the United States it was the opposite, all the status went to the technologists and the scientists, none to the farmers. We all know, the farmers were called the hicks and rednecks, you don't have to grovel in the dirt.

There are many areas throughout the Midwest where the parents discouraged their children from farming. But our fathers, praise the Lord, said farming is the best work you can do. My father said it is a Christian way of working. He said when you sell, the milk goes out the driveway, the hogs and the beef go off to market, you take the check they sent you in the mail. When you go to the mill to buy feed or whatever you needed you paid what they asked, there was no bargaining. He said that is the Christian way of living. We'll get into this more tonight: we are in America now, how can we live in this world? I don't have the answers, but I have a lot of ideas.

It's not all the Germans, Dan. You know the Germans, until they learned from the Anabaptists, were dumping their manure into the Rhine to get rid of it.

Do we know why the Anabaptists went to the Midwest and not to the south? They wanted no part of slavery. In the 1600s they already said that slavery is wrong, it is not Christian for one person to own another person. So they came to the Midwest, and of course they came right into the best soils in the world. And they flourished. We have the work ethic, we have the knowledge of farming, and it's like a two-edged sword – we can become successful. And we all know in our Ordnung... We are the only people in North America and Europe to have an Ordnung that was made to control wealth. That is sometimes a two-edged sword, we become successful. But in farming we'll never be so rich that we have to go to a winter watering hole...

Nathan Overholt: Is that where I come from?

David Kline: No, no, that is Pinecraft, you don't live in Pinecraft. It's like someone said, it's the corn, soybean, Florida rotation now.

You know, we're all cow people, all of us in here come from a cow people background. As someone said, the cow brings you home from places you'd rather not be. You are somewhere, and about 3 o'clock in the afternoon you pull out your watch, and say, "Mom, I think we should go home, it's time to milk." The cow brings you home. It gives structure to life. You get up in the morning, you have structure. These people that have no cows, I'm not saying they don't have structure, but they may sleep until 8 o'clock.

Well anyhow, I'm an advocate of farming, but not everybody can farm, land is too scarce, but we love farming. Our five children are involved in farming, one is involved in working for farmers, but the other four are dairy farmers. I help out where I can, and it's just...working the fields, it's just a wonderful way of living – cultivating corn on a 75° day in June, life just doesn't get better. Good soil, good company, with the horses and the dogs. You can talk to yourself, nobody will be worried.